

HOW TO SELECT A
**LANDSCAPE
CONTRACTOR**
BE AN INFORMED CONSUMER

*A well-designed, installed, and maintained
landscape can save water.*





Installing a new landscape

AN ATTRACTIVE LANDSCAPE CAN ADD CONSIDERABLE VALUE TO A HOME. Choosing the right contractor(s) can determine the success or failure of this important investment. It also allows you to create a landscape that is more water efficient and one that requires less maintenance.

Use the following guidelines when evaluating choices for your landscape installation.



First, decide how the landscape contractor can help you and the scope of your project. If you wish to work on some of the project yourself, find out if the contractor is amenable to this arrangement. Installing plant material, building decks and patios, installing retaining walls and irrigation systems, and installing night lighting are just a few of the services that landscape contractors can provide. **Second,** decide who will provide the ongoing maintenance of your landscape – you or the contractor. Ask friends, neighbors, relatives and co-workers if they would recommend anyone based on their past experience and if they would use this particular landscaping business again.

IS THE CONTRACTOR QUALIFIED? ARE THEY:

- ☞ Properly licensed, bonded, and insured as a landscape contractor? (Check with the Landscape Contractors Board to confirm: (503) 986-6561 or www.lcb.state.or.us.)
- ☞ Licensed to do the specific type of work that is being conducted?
 - ☛ Standard License: planning and installing lawns, shrubs, vines, trees, water features, any other decorative vegetation. Also allows building of fences, decks, arbors, driveways, walkways, and retaining walls.
 - ☛ Irrigation Only Plus Backflow License: planning and installing irrigation systems and installation of backflow protection.
 - ☛ All Phase Plus Backflow License: all aspects of landscape installation and construction. This is the “highest” level of licensure with the Landscape Contractors Board.
- ☞ Able to provide current and past references with completed projects and professional qualifications? Better yet, visit one of their landscaping projects in progress.

TIPS TO HELP YOU WITH YOUR SELECTION PROCESS:

- ☞ Request the contractor inspect the site prior to writing an estimate.
- ☞ Ask if there is a fee for providing a written estimate.

- ☞ Obtain at least three written estimates. Your estimate should include price of the design and installation of the landscape, all labor, materials, and local taxes and permit fees. Remember, a low bid is not necessarily going to save you time, water and money in the long run. Read the fine print.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT THE CONTRACTOR’S COMPANY:

- ☞ How long has the company been in business?
- ☞ Does the firm intend to use subcontractors? If so, are they qualified and do they have the appropriate certifications/licenses? Make sure you receive a copy of “Information Notice to Owner about Construction Liens” – it is your responsibility for payment to subcontractors and suppliers even if you have paid your licensed landscape business in full. Learn how to protect yourself from liens.
- ☞ What is the educational background and work experience of the employees who will work on your project, and what kind of continuing education do they receive?
- ☞ What professional affiliations does the company hold? Do they belong to OLCA (Oregon Landscape Contractors Association); ALCA (Associated Landscape Contractors of America); the IA (Irrigation Association)?
- ☞ What certifications do the workers hold?



- ☼ How are the design fees structured?
- ☼ What is the payment schedule? As recommended by the Landscape Contractors Board, it is customary to pay 25 to 35 percent of the total cost up front to cover early expenses by the contractor and make final payment only when you are completely satisfied with the job.
- ☼ Insurance is a big concern. Landscape work requires comprehensive insurance – both liability and worker's compensation. Be sure to ask for proof of insurance. If a landscaper is licensed with the Landscape Contractors Board, they have a surety bond (minimum \$3000), and general liability insurance (minimum \$100,000).
- ☼ Ask about guarantees – will the landscaper or nursery stand behind a guarantee on plant material? How long will the guarantee be in place?

ASK ABOUT ADVANCED CERTIFICATIONS:

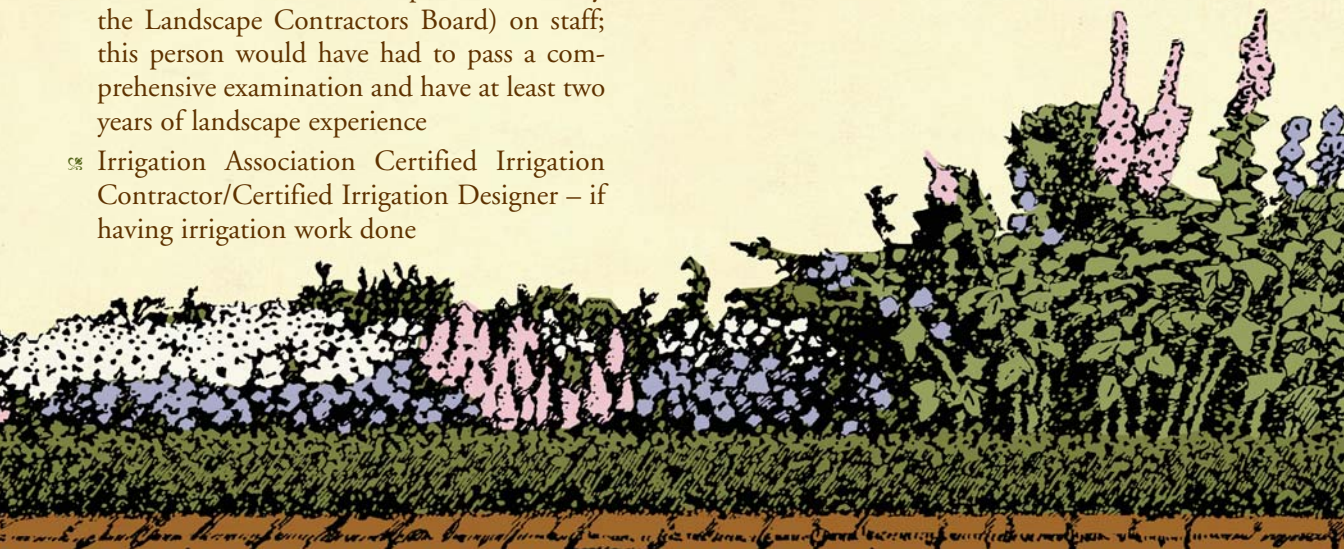
- ☼ Oregon Landscape Contractors Association (OLCA) Certified Landscape Technician (CLT)
- ☼ American Landscape Contractors Association (ALCA) Certified Landscape Professional (CLP)
- ☼ Licensed individual landscape contractor (by the Landscape Contractors Board) on staff; this person would have had to pass a comprehensive examination and have at least two years of landscape experience
- ☼ Irrigation Association Certified Irrigation Contractor/Certified Irrigation Designer – if having irrigation work done

ARE THEY REPUTABLE?

- ☼ Ask for references, and take the time to visit previous jobs of prospective contractors.
- ☼ Talk to past and present customers to answer questions such as:
 - ☛ Did the contractor display good work habits; for example, returning calls promptly and keeping appointments?
 - ☛ Did the contractor honor the contract with the customer?
 - ☛ Was the contractor responsive to concerns expressed by the customer?
 - ☛ Did the contractor design and install a landscape that met the customer's goals?

WHAT YOUR LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR SHOULD PROVIDE:

- ☼ Proper selection of plants and plant materials that are suitable for the Pacific Northwest climate
- ☼ Plants with like watering needs grouped in the same irrigation zone
- ☼ Plants that are appropriately located to other plants, structures, hardscapes and exposures so as to reduce unneeded maintenance



- ☞ Appropriate planting practices; for example, plant holes should be dug twice as wide and deep as the root ball
- ☞ Soil testing and analysis
- ☞ Appropriate soil amendments based on the soil testing results
- ☞ Copy of the landscape plan, to scale, and landscape requirements

CONTRACTS:

- ☞ Legally, all landscape projects require a written contract. This protects both parties in case of a dispute.
- ☞ The contract should include:
 - ☞ Landscape business name, address, phone number
 - ☞ Your name and address
 - ☞ Address of job site (if different than above)
 - ☞ List of plant materials used, size, quantity – all of which should be included in the landscape plan
 - ☞ General description of work to be performed
 - ☞ Estimated time for completion and/or completion date
 - ☞ Description of guarantee/warranty materials and services – if no guarantee or warranty, this needs to be stated in writing
 - ☞ Signatures of both parties
 - ☞ Statement that the business is licensed with the Oregon Landscape Contractors Board (LCB) and the LCB's address and phone number plus any other applicable licenses, such as business licenses
 - ☞ Any special requirements that both parties agree to

- ☞ Confirm who will obtain all necessary permits, e.g., driveways, some decks, retaining walls in excess of certain heights, backflow protection installation, and low voltage wiring (for irrigation and/or lighting). *Ultimately, it is the owner's responsibility to ensure that all permits are obtained.*
- ☞ Make all changes to the contract **in writing**.

YOU, THE CUSTOMER, SHOULD:

- ☞ Make sure the contract lists all materials, services, and requirements you, the customer, want and/or need.
- ☞ Check license status for your contractor by calling the Landscape Contractors Board at (503) 986-6561, send the Board an e-mail at lcb.info@state.or.us, or check the Website, www.oregon.gov/LCB.
- ☞ Keep good written records, including a log of conversations, copies of correspondence, cancelled checks, contract, change orders, and receipts, in case of problems.
- ☞ Communicate with your contractor during the project. This will save many problems that more than likely lead to disputes.
- ☞ If you do have problems, call the Landscape Contractors Board for a "Claim Form" or go to their Website to download the form. The deadline for filing claims is one year from the date the work was substantially completed.



Maintaining your water-conserving landscape

CHOOSING THE RIGHT LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE COMPANY CAN ENSURE A HEALTHY, WATER-EFFICIENT LANDSCAPE AND PROTECT YOUR INVESTMENT. The following information can help you select a landscape maintenance contractor who is right for you.

RESIDENTIAL LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE

Since a good landscape represents a sizable investment, you need to maintain that investment or lose its benefits. You may, however, be tired of mowing lawns, don't have enough time, or are physically unable to do the work. If you find yourself in such a position, you may wish to hire someone to do all or part of your landscape maintenance.

WHAT LEVEL OF WORK DO YOU NEED?

There are three general types of landscape maintenance: partial landscape care, total landscape care, and total landscape maintenance. Many maintenance companies offer all three. The process for choosing a contractor is the same regardless of the level of maintenance. For a water-efficient landscape, an irrigation maintenance program is important. You should consider the maintenance of your irrigation system when hiring a company to maintain your landscape. It is not uncommon to hire one firm to maintain

the landscape and another to maintain the irrigation system.

PARTIAL LANDSCAPE CARE

Partial Landscape Care is the most common form of maintenance used by the homeowner and is comprised chiefly of mowing the lawn on a regular basis. The Landscape Contractors Board considers this type of maintenance to be casual labor and does not require licensing. **Please note: Casual, unlicensed labor, cannot provide any new landscape construction or the installation and/or maintenance of automatic sprinkler systems.** Partial Landscape Care by unlicensed contractors is limited to \$500.00 per year and may include re-seeding existing lawns, replacement of existing plant materials such as shrubs, flowers, bulbs, and small trees with material of similar variety.

TOTAL LANDSCAPE CARE

Total Landscape Care is more commonly used by businesses, condominiums and some homeowners. This level of service usually includes mowing, application of pesticides and fertilizers, and irrigation system operation and maintenance. **Irrigation maintenance should, at a minimum, consist of a monthly inspection and repair of all irrigation heads and adjustment of irrigation run-times throughout the irrigation season.** Other services may be available and should be detailed in the maintenance contract. If unwanted services are detailed in the contract, cross them off the contract before you sign and make sure that you are not charged for these services.



TOTAL LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE

Total Landscape Maintenance is most commonly used by businesses and a few homeowners. This type of maintenance provides for complete care of the landscape, including mowing, application of pesticides and fertilizers, irrigation system operation and repair, maintenance of trees, shrubs, flowerbeds, and the construction of new landscape elements. Under this level of maintenance, the contractor should re-set your irrigation controller as the weather changes, and should check your irrigation system frequently for broken, misaligned and/or blocked heads.

WHERE TO GET REFERENCES:

To develop a list of potential maintenance contractors, personal references are a great place to start. Ask neighbors, friends, relatives, and co-workers what person or company they use for maintenance, and ask if they would recommend that contractor. You can also look in the Yellow Pages under "Landscape Contractors" for the names and phone numbers of landscape maintenance companies. Ask each contractor you contact for a list of references, and then follow through by observing the quality of their work. When you have completed your list, narrow it down by matching the best landscapes you have observed with the contractor who is conducting the maintenance on that particular landscape. Once you have narrowed your list to three or four contractors, schedule interviews with those persons to ask some very important questions.

ASK QUESTIONS:

Ask each person/firm questions to better judge who you prefer maintaining your landscape:

- ☞ **How often do they mow?** (Weekly, monthly, other?)
- ☞ **Do they use mulching mowers or bag the clippings?** (Mulching mowers leave very fine clippings to filter down through the grass and provide nutrients, primarily nitrogen, for the lawn, thereby reducing the amount of fertilizer and water needed.)
- ☞ **How often do they apply fertilizer, and what type do they use?** (Over-fertilizing is one of the primary causes of non-point source pollution in streams and rivers. Applying the right amount of fertilizer at the right time can help avoid this pollution. Fertilizer should be applied a maximum of four times per year, and suitable to the time of year. For example, spring fertilizer should be high in nitrogen to promote green growth above the soil while fall fertilizer should be lower in nitrogen and higher in potassium and phosphorous to promote root growth during the winter.)
- ☞ **Will soil tests be conducted?** (How does the maintenance person know what amount of fertilizer to apply if they do not know the condition of the soil?)
- ☞ **Will pesticides be used? When and what type? Are the persons applying the pesticides licensed for pesticide application?** (Your lawn will not need pesticides unless there is a pest problem, but if pesticides are to be applied, you need to know if the person applying them is knowledgeable in their application.)



☞ **If there is to be irrigation maintenance, is the contractor licensed by the Landscape Contractors Board? Do they have Irrigation Association certifications?** (Installation and/or maintenance of an irrigation system requires a license from the Landscape Contractors Board.)

☞ **Does the service include aerating the lawn area?** (Aeration aids in getting water, air, and nutrients to the roots of your lawn, which can reduce the amount of water needed for a healthy lawn.)

☞ **Are mulching and soil amendments to be added?** (In flower and shrub beds, mulching reduces water loss due to evaporation and helps suppress weeds. Mulch depth should be applied at a minimum of 2 inches in depth.)

☞ **Who do I call if there is a question or a problem?** (If you are hiring a company with many employees, the contractor should provide you with the name and number of the person to contact regarding questions or complaints.)

☞ **What is the company's main area of expertise?** (You may wish to think twice about hiring someone to maintain your lawn if his or her main area of expertise is pruning trees.)

☞ **Will your landscape be surveyed prior to formulating a maintenance plan?** (A survey aids the contractor in formulating a maintenance plan suitable to your particular landscape.)

☞ **Trade associations help their members become more knowledgeable. Are the contractor, and/or his or her laborers, members of any of the following trade associations?**

- ☞ Oregon Landscape Contractors Association (OLCA)
- ☞ Associated Landscape Contractors of America (ALCA)
- ☞ Irrigation Association (IA)

☞ **Are there any warranties for the work done?** (This should be in writing or should be written into your contract.)

THE CONTRACT:

You will want a written agreement (contract) with the maintenance contractor. Read the contract carefully. **Accept no unwritten assurances.** If you discuss items or changes, make sure they are clearly spelled out in the contract. Items the contract should include are:

- ☞ A detailed list of all work that is to be done.
- ☞ The frequency of the work: for example, how many times per month will they mow the lawn, trim the trees, pull the weeds.
- ☞ What are the service costs?
- ☞ How and when is payment due?
- ☞ Are there any warranties on materials and workmanship?





The Regional Water Providers Consortium encourages the wise use of water and other resources on landscapes. Your landscape contractor should be able to find new ways to improve the health of your landscape and use less water. Don't hesitate to ask questions and to make sure you understand the landscape construction or maintenance service you are getting. Being an informed consumer can help promote wise water use. A well-designed, installed, and maintained landscape can save water.

For more information regarding water-efficient landscape practices (including proper plant placement), please visit the Regional Water Providers Consortium Website at www.conserveh2o.org, or call your local water provider.